UNITED NATIONS **S**

Security Council

Distr.
GENERAL

S/1997/827
28 October 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA, GEORGIA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted in pursuance of resolution 1124 (1997) of 31 July 1997, in which the Security Council decided to extend the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) for an additional period terminating on 31 January 1998, subject to a review by the Council of the mandate of the Observer Mission in the event of any changes that may be made in the mandate or in the presence of the CIS peacekeeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Council also requested me to continue to keep it regularly informed and to report after three months from the date of the adoption of the resolution on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, including on the operations of UNOMIG, and to provide recommendations in that report on the nature of the United Nations presence. The present report provides an update of the situation as at 27 October 1997.

II. POLITICAL ASPECTS

2. The Georgian/Abkhaz peace process was reactivated during the reporting period through strenuous efforts made by my Special Representative, Mr. Liviu Bota, and the Russian Federation in its capacity as facilitator, with the assistance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia. There have also been bilateral contacts between both sides to the conflict. Despite those efforts, there continues to be no visible progress on the key issues - the future political status of Abkhazia and the permanent return of refugees and displaced persons. However, both sides have reaffirmed their commitment to resolving the conflict by political means.

3. I met with Georgian President Eduard A. Shevardnadze on 21 July in New York. We discussed all important aspects of the peace process, including the role of the United Nations in the political and peacekeeping fields. I have already reported (see S/1997/558/Add.1) on the holding of a high-level meeting

on the conflict at Geneva from 23 to 25 July, held in order to map out the areas where political progress could be made under the chairmanship of my Special Representative. Mr. Bota had intended, after consultations with the two sides, to resume the adjourned meeting on 13 October at Geneva, but was informed on 8 October by the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Vladislav Ardzinba, that the Abkhaz side needed more time for preparation on substantive issues. Regarding the draft "Protocol" (see S/1997/558, para. 5), Mr. Ardzinba stated that the text, as agreed by him, could not be subject to further discussion and that it should simply be signed. At the same time, the Russian Federation also expressed preference for a postponement of the Geneva meeting in view of the fact that it had scheduled negotiations with the two sides in Moscow on the text of the draft Protocol during that period. Following further consultations with the two sides and the Russian Federation as facilitator, it has now been agreed that the meeting should be resumed at Geneva on 17 November.

4. On 1 August, President Boris N. Yeltsin of the Russian Federation invited President Shevardnadze and Mr. Ardzinba to join him for a meeting in Moscow aimed at making headway in the peace process. In that connection, President Yeltsin expressed support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and broad autonomy for Abkhazia, and suggested that the experience of the Russian Federation in defining relations between the centre and the regions be taken into account in settling the conflict in Abkhazia. Though both President Shevardnadze and Mr. Ardzinba welcomed the initiative, they preferred to conduct further preparatory work before meeting in Moscow.

5. Georgian/Abkhaz negotiations took place at Sukhumi on 9 and 10 September under the chairmanship of the First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Mr. Boris Pastukhov. My Special Representative, accompanied by the Chief Military Observer of UNOMIG and the head of the office in Georgia of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) participated in the meeting. In a joint communiqué adopted at the end of the negotiations, the parties, inter alia, reaffirmed their determination to strive towards a prompt resolution of existing problems and the signing of the draft Protocol in Moscow in the near future, in accordance with President Yeltsin's initiative of 1 August 1997. Recognizing the necessity of promptly beginning the process of an orderly and phased return of refugees and displaced persons, the two sides agreed that the discussion should be continued. They expressed their intention to coordinate efforts to eliminate bandit groups, whose activities disrupt the peace process and impede a settlement of the conflict and the return of refugees. The two sides supported intensifying the efforts of the CIS peacekeeping force to end the activities of such groups in the conflict zone. They welcomed the reinvigoration of the United Nations role in the peace process.

6. There have also been direct bilateral contacts between the two sides. On 14 August, President Shevardnadze met Mr. Ardzinba at Tbilisi. The meeting was facilitated by the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Mr. Yevgeni Primakov, who, prior to the meeting, had met with Mr. Ardzinba at Sochi on 9 and 10 August. In addition to the tête-à-tête meeting with President Shevardnadze, the Abkhaz leader and the members of his delegation met with political personalities at Tbilisi, including the Speaker of the Parliament, Mr. Zurab Zhvania. At the conclusion of the visit,

President Shevardnadze and Mr. Ardzinba signed a statement in which they declared, inter alia, their determination to put an end to the conflict and to restore relations of peaceful life and mutual respect. They reaffirmed their commitment not to resort to force and to settle any differences exclusively by political means through negotiations and consultations. The two sides pointed out that they had reached an agreement on a number of key issues of a peaceful settlement, though some substantial differences remained, and it was agreed to maintain constant contact in order to solve the problems caused by the conflict.

7. On 20 August, a Georgian government delegation visited Sukhumi and met with the Abkhaz leaders. Discussions focused on issues of cooperation in fields such as energy and communications. They decided to set up a coordination commission to address practical matters. On 21 and 22 September, an Abkhaz delegation visited Tbilisi, where it was received by President Shevardnadze and had talks with government officials, mainly on economic issues in the framework of the Coordination Commission. The two sides reportedly also agreed to open another channel of dialogue, among parliamentarians. According to a subsequent public statement by the Abkhaz side, unresolved political issues were affecting cooperation in various domains, including transport and communications. The next session of the Coordination Commission is scheduled for early November 1997, when Georgian representatives will travel to Sukhumi.

III. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

8. Despite the efforts of aid agencies throughout Abkhazia, Georgia, the consequences of the unresolved conflict for the population remain dire. According to reports, access to food is limited and there is widespread poverty, in particular, among the aged who have no family support or income. The level of health of the general population is falling and infectious diseases afflict thousands of civilians. The health sector is crippled by a destroyed infrastructure and outmoded policies and practices. Shelter, especially in Gali and Ochamchira but also in Sukhumi, is inadequate. Schools are in disrepair and lack basic supplies such as furniture, pens, paper and chalk. Moreover, the strains of war and subsequent isolation have had a dramatic psychological impact on children and adults alike, who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders such as violent behaviour.

9. UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Acción contra la Hambre (ACH) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF-France) continue to be the main agencies addressing the needs of civilians in Abkhazia. In addition, Counterpart International and the United Methodist Committee on Relief have started working in the region. UNHCR has enhanced its comprehensive programme by providing shelter materials for civilians who need support to rebuild their homes; repairing, in collaboration with ACH, 31 schools throughout Abkhazia and supplying them with furniture and school kits from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); and distributing equipment and health kits to health structures and an ambulance to the hospital in Gali. The recent arrival of a protection officer has also enabled UNHCR to increase its capacity to address the protection needs of the population. ICRC continues its programmes of protection and family messages throughout the region. In addition, ICRC continues its agriculture, food aid, soup kitchen, prosthesis and medical programmes and is

preparing special parcels for the winter months. MSF-France targets support to district hospitals, the tuberculosis hospital in Gulripshi and the chlorination of water supplies in Sukhumi. The Kodori Valley has benefited from a needs assessment mission led by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, which found gaps in programmes, particularly in the health sector. Counterpart International is now addressing those needs.

10. Once again, the security situation in the region threatens aid workers and the property of their agencies. Recent hostage-taking incidents are particularly worrisome in that regard. Aid agencies have raised their concerns with the two sides to the conflict and have called on them to provide full support to ensure that life-saving programmes can continue to reach civilians in need.

11. The support of the international donor community for humanitarian programmes in Abkhazia does not meet the needs of the region. During September, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, working in close cooperation with UNHCR and other agencies, organized a visit to the region for the Netherlands Humanitarian Aid Division and a similar visit is planned for the Swedish International Development Agency. It is hoped that donors will come forward with contributions in the immediate future so that the current level of programming can be maintained.

12. The United Nations office for the protection and promotion of human rights in Abkhazia, Georgia, continues its work as mandated by the Security Council and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In addition to its main office at UNOMIG headquarters, a sub-office was opened in the city centre of Sukhumi on 1 July in order to be easily accessible to the public. Since that time, visits by members of the local population have increased significantly. Visitors have received information and advice on human rights questions. United Nations human rights publications have been distributed. In October, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights sent an expert consultant to Sukhumi to support further the work of the office.

IV. OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA

13. During the reporting period UNOMIG continued to operate in the security and restricted weapons zones of the Zugdidi and Gali sectors and in the Kodori Valley. Since 16 September, following a hostage-taking incident (see para. 23 below) and in view of persistent security threats, the modus operandi in the Zugdidi and the Gali sectors has been temporarily revised. Uninhabited areas are currently not being visited; patrolling in groups of two vehicles at all times has been instated in the Zugdidi sector; and patrolling by bicycles and on foot has been suspended, as has close monitoring of the crossing points over the Inguri River. In addition, flak jackets and helmets are now being worn by all UNOMIG personnel in the security zone of the Zugdidi sector. Within those limitations, it is the Chief Military Observer's assessment that UNOMIG continues to be able to observe and verify the parties' compliance with the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, signed in Moscow on 14 May 1994 (S/1994/583 and Corr.1, annex I). The Mission maintains three team

bases and a sector headquarters in each of the Zugdidi and Gali sectors (see map). In addition, there is one team base in the Kodori Valley manned periodically by observers operating from Sukhumi. The Mission's strength stands at 109 observers deployed from 23 countries (see annex).

14. A United Nations medical survey team visited the Mission during the summer to assess the medical, logistical and operational requirements of UNOMIG. The team assessed the Mission's medical facilities to be well organized and equipped, but recommended that they be provided with helicopter support for medical evacuation and with an additional ambulance. Arrangements are being made to provide the Mission with the required equipment.

15. It will be recalled that UNOMIG has made vigorous efforts to improve the safety of the Mission's staff. Nonetheless, its personnel and property were again the victims of acts of violence, including hostage-taking, robbery and theft. As a result of this situation and in addition to the change in patrolling patterns, a number of improvements are being put in place. Arrangements are being made to provide the Mission with ballistic-protective vehicles to enhance the security of the military observers and to enable them to patrol areas where armed bandits and other groups are believed to operate. In addition, a United Nations security team will visit the mission area between 5 and 15 November to provide a "training of trainers" workshop on the handling of hostage-taking incidents. The team will also ascertain whether additional security measures are required.

16. The mine threat persisted during the reporting period and several mine-related incidents were reported. The tactics of the armed groups appear to have evolved and they now use more sophisticated, remote-controlled explosive devices against carefully selected targets. As indicated in my previous reports, the mine-layers do not appear to target UNOMIG. Nonetheless, the Mission continues to take the security measures described above and is pursuing its road resurfacing project (see S/1997/340, para. 32). The project is currently interrupted owing to threats against contracted construction workers, but is expected to resume in the near future.

17. The weekly quadripartite meetings chaired by the Commander of the CIS peacekeeping force, which were suspended on 2 July when the Abkhaz side did not attend in protest against what it stated was continued infiltration by Georgian armed groups into Abkhazia (see S/1997/558, para. 20), resumed on 27 August. It will be recalled that the meetings bring together the Chief Military Observer of UNOMIG and representatives of the Georgian and Abkhaz police, militia, security services and local administration to discuss security and other issues affecting both sides at the local level.

18. UNOMIG continues to cooperate with United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations working on both sides of the Inguri River. It shares information with them and provides escorts when requested.

V. COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA AND THE COLLECTIVE PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

19. UNOMIG continues to observe the operations of the CIS peacekeeping force within the framework of the implementation of the 1994 Agreement. Cooperation on the ground between the two operations continues as described in my previous report (see S/1997/558, para. 33). Frequent and regular meetings are held to discuss matters affecting the activities of the two and mutual assistance in the sectors continues satisfactorily. It will be recalled that UNOMIG had made security arrangements with the CIS peacekeeping force. Although those arrangements have proved to be useful on several occasions, there remains a need to formalize operational procedures and the circumstances under which the CIS peacekeeping force should react to assist UNOMIG. The force was unable to assist the Mission significantly during the hostage-taking incident of 16 September because it was felt that the involvement of the force could be counterproductive and could place the lives of the hostages in serious danger.

20. The force continues to operate static checkpoints throughout the security zone and its patrolling remains limited because of the persistent mine threat. As the Security Council was informed on 14 October, two of the force's officers were severely wounded recently when attempting to defuse a booby-trapped device.

21. The mandate of the CIS peacekeeping force, which expired on 31 July, has been under consideration by political and military officials of the Russian Federation and the Government of Georgia. Following discussions at the Summit of the Council of Heads of State of CIS, which began on 22 October, the mandate was extended until 31 January 1998.

VI. SITUATION ON THE GROUND

A. General

22. The situation in the Gali and Zugdidi restricted weapons and security zones remains unsettled and tense. Criminal activities against the local population and international personnel have continued and local authorities on both sides of the Inguri River remain unable to deal fully with the situation. In a significant change from their usual operational pattern, armed groups have increased their activities in the restricted weapons zone and in areas beyond the UNOMIG area of responsibility. Such groups have continued to use mines and appear to have acquired weapons equipped with night vision capability. During the reporting period, three Abkhaz soldiers, one CIS peacekeeping force soldier and six civilians were killed in mine-related and other armed incidents in Abkhazia. On 28 September, and for the first time since the beginning of the 1996 mine campaign, two mine incidents took place in the Zugdidi sector, killing one civilian.

23. During the period covered by this report, armed groups operating from south of the Inguri River added another dimension to their tactics as small groups now infiltrate deep into Abkhaz territory. In addition, on two occasions and for the first time since the inception of the Mission, both the CIS peacekeeping

force and UNOMIG were the victims of hostage-taking incidents in the Zugdidi sector. On 16 August, three members of the CIS peacekeeping force were taken hostage in the security zone of that sector. The hostage-takers demanded the release of two dead bodies in return for the hostages. After five days of discussions, the demands of the hostage-takers were met and the soldiers were released. As members of the Security Council are aware, the second hostage-taking incident took place on 16 September, when two United Nations military observers and a local staff member were taken hostage by three unknown individuals in the Zugdidi sector. One hostage was released soon thereafter in order to deliver a message demanding a ransom for the release of the other two. Efforts to secure their release were made by the Chief Military Observer of UNOMIG, in consultation with the Georgian security forces and representatives of the CIS peacekeeping force. Ultimately, however, and in view of the immediate grave danger to the hostages, UNOMIG agreed to pay part of the ransom requested by the hostage-takers. The hostages were then released unharmed. While it was fortunately possible to resolve the incident peacefully, the payment of ransom is contrary to established United Nations policy, which dictates that the Organization should neither pay ransom nor make substantial concessions for the release of hostages. It should be stressed, therefore, that the incident does not set a precedent. United Nations policy in this regard has been reaffirmed both at Headquarters and in the Mission area.

B. Security and restricted weapons zones

24. Both sides continue to violate the 14 May 1994 Agreement. During the period, UNOMIG reported 22 violations by the Abkhaz side and 54 by the Georgian side, the majority of which were minor ones involving individual servicemen found without arms in the security zone. However, more significant violations were committed by both sides. On 29 September, several items of heavy military equipment were introduced into the restricted weapons zone of the Zugdidi sector in the context of a military exercise in the Kulevi training area, part of which is within the restricted weapons zone. For its part, the Abkhaz side has denied UNOMIG access to a coastal road on the northern side of the Gali Canal, stating that it believed that the road was mined. In addition, since 27 July, an infantry company has been present in the security zone of the Gali sector.

25. There also continue to be long-standing violations of the 1994 Agreement by both sides. Although such violations have been protested repeatedly on the spot and often at the highest levels, they continue to be committed and, of late, with added frequency. On the Georgian side, violations include the presence of an artillery unit at Khobi in the restricted weapons zone; regular passage of heavy weapons through that zone to enter the Kulevi training area; and restriction on UNOMIG's freedom of movement and access to the Senaki heavy weapons storage site and the Torsa compound. The Abkhaz side continues to restrict the Mission's freedom of movement along the coastal road mentioned above; the placement of army observation posts in the security zone; the stationing of an army mountain infantry company at Akermara; denial of access to the Ochamchira heavy weapons storage site; and tank training within the restricted weapons zone between Ochamchira and Primorsk.

C. Kodori Valley

26. The situation in the Kodori Valley has been tense and unstable. UNOMIG, which continues to patrol the valley regularly and to assist non-governmental organizations operating in the area, has not observed any violation of the 1994 Agreement. In implementation of its mandate to create conditions conducive to the safe and orderly return of refugees, UNOMIG chaired two quadripartite meetings involving representatives of two feuding Svanetian clans and representatives from the CIS peacekeeping force. During the meetings the parties agreed to a verbal "non-aggression pact" and to continue their dialogue. Georgian police units and the representatives of the "Abkhaz government in exile" maintain their presence in the Kodori Valley, but are not able to provide adequate security in the area. On 8 July, UNOMIG received reports that there had been fighting between Abkhaz and Svans, near the Russian border in the Kodori Valley, some 20 kilometres outside the Mission's area of responsibility. Although the Svanetian forces in the area were mobilized, the seriousness of the incident appears to have been exaggerated and UNOMIG did not find any evidence to substantiate it. On 21 September, two men were shot dead in what was seen as a revenge attack for a similar incident two years ago.

VII. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

27. The Government of Georgia continues to ensure proper coordination of donor activities with assistance from both United Nations and non-United Nations organizations. In August, the Government completed preparation of the country strategy note, which defines Georgia's development priorities for the next three years, linking developmental requirements with continued humanitarian needs. In September, the country strategy note was officially presented to the donor community by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was accompanied by the United Nations Resident Coordinator and the heads of the United Nations specialized agencies operating in Georgia.

28. The economic results of the first half of 1997 are particularly positive. External debt has stabilized and the financial position of Georgia, even though it has not improved, remains substantially unchanged. The rate of exchange is stable and very close to the value defined in 1995 when the new currency (the lari) was introduced to replace the coupons. The global value of the reserves of the Central Bank is sufficient to cover the foreign exchange needs of the country for two months.

29. The energy situation remains one of the major concerns of the country on the eve of another winter without proper capacity to satisfy the demand for electricity for domestic and productive uses. Last May and June, maintenance work at the Inguri River dam forced the Government to replace hydroelectric power, which is normally utilized in summer, with energy produced by the combustion of natural gas, thus consuming the limited gas reserves that are normally utilized during the winter months. As a consequence, it is expected that between January and March 1998 the electrical power supply available to the population will be even lower than last winter unless assistance is provided to procure additional gas.

VIII. OBSERVATIONS

30. My Special Representative has made strenuous efforts to reinvigorate the United Nations role in the Georgian/Abkhaz peace process. In that connection, he chaired the Geneva meeting held with both sides to the conflict from 23 to 25 July 1997. He has been consulting closely on all aspects of the peace process with various representatives of both sides, as well as with those of the Russian Federation, in its capacity as facilitator. He has also kept regular contact with OSCE and the Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia.

31. It is disappointing that the meeting scheduled to take place at Geneva in mid-October had to be postponed. As reflected in the preceding paragraphs, my Special Representative has pursued intensive discussions with all concerned and there is now every hope that the Geneva process will be resumed from 17 to 20 November. In continuation of the agenda of the Geneva meeting of 23 to 25 July, the forthcoming meeting will map out areas where concrete political progress can be made. But it will also seek to make headway on social and economic issues aimed at supporting progress towards a comprehensive settlement of the conflict. It will also address the issue of the return of refugees.

32. It is now about five years since my predecessor dispatched the first good-will mission to Georgia and, since then, the international community has spent much effort - in vain - to move the conflict towards a peaceful solution. While doubtless the ultimate responsibility for progress in peace efforts lies squarely upon the parties, the Security Council's mandate provides for an innovative, experimental mediatory arrangement that offers the potential for productive synergy that could usefully assist the parties in their difficult challenge. For my part, I will continue to ensure that the United Nations approaches these efforts in a spirit of full transparency and coordination, as required for the arrangement to succeed. Without the presence of UNOMIG and the CIS peacekeeping force, there can be little doubt that open conflict would resume. I urge all concerned to use the opportunity of the resumed Geneva meeting in November to achieve substantive progress.

33. While ceasefire violations have been limited to incidents of a non-violent nature (see para. 24) and the forces of both sides have remained separated since the signing of the 14 May 1994 Agreement, it is regrettable that several longstanding and significant violations of the Agreement have remained and UNOMIG's calls for their cessation have gone unheeded. I call, therefore, on the parties to abide fully by the Agreement and to cooperate with the Mission in that regard.

34. As Council members have seen, the mine threat and armed and criminal activities have been threatening the lives of innocent civilians and have affected the operations of aid agencies, the CIS peacekeeping force and UNOMIG. The Secretariat continues to do all it can to improve the safety of UNOMIG personnel and additional measures presented in paragraphs 14 and 15 above will be at a cost. I will be submitting to the Council in due course an addendum to the report containing the financial implications of those measures. The onus, however, is on the parties to ensure, in their own interest, that unarmed observers are able to operate in a secure environment. I again call on both sides to do all they can to improve the security situation in the area and to

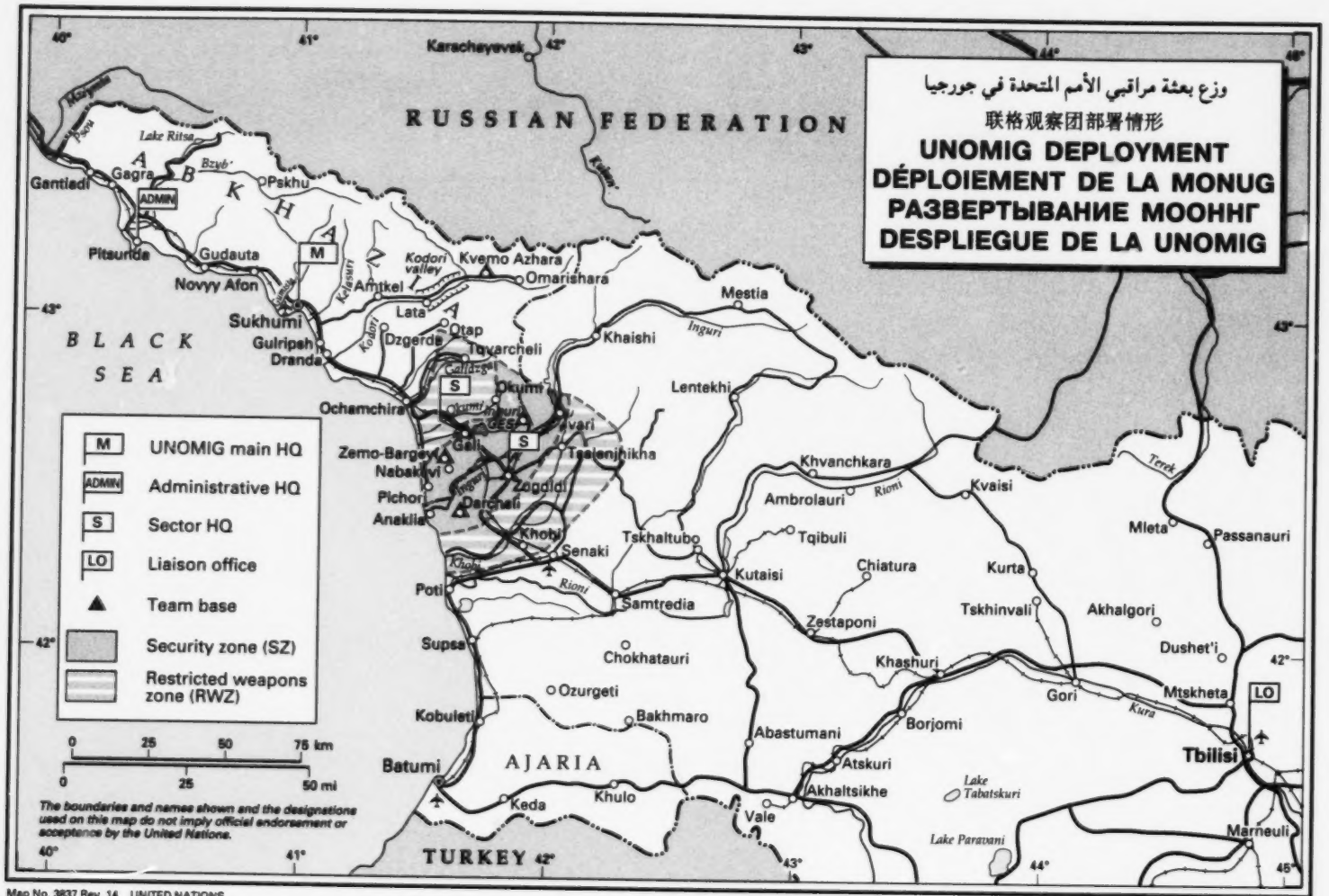
put an end to such activities, which are seriously affecting the lives of the population.

35. In concluding this report, I wish to thank my Special Representative, the Chief Military Observer and all international and local staff under their command for their dedication to the service of peace.

Annex

Composition of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia as at 24 October 1997

Country	Military observers
Albania	1
Austria	4
Bangladesh	9
Cuba	1
Czech Republic	4
Denmark	5
Egypt	4
France	5
Germany	10
Greece	4
Hungary	5
Indonesia	5
Jordan	8
Pakistan	3
Poland	4
Republic of Korea	4
Russian Federation	3
Sweden	5
Switzerland	5
Turkey	5
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	7
United States of America	4
Uruguay	4
Total	109



Map No. 3837 Rev. 14 UNITED NATIONS
October 1997

Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section